## CHAPTER VI

## BEYOND DEPRESSION : A BALANCE

> In the theory of psychoanalysis we have no hesistation in assuming that the course taken by mental events is automatically regulated by the pleasure principle. We believe, that is to say, that the course of the events is invariably set in motion by an unpleasurable tension, and that it takes a direction such that its final outcome coincides with a lowering of that tension -- that is with an avoidance of unpleasure or of production of pleasure.
>
> (Freud, Beyond the Pleasure Principle 275)

Larkin has been misunderstood as a poet of unrelieved pessimism without any hope for mankind or any support or satisfaction for the human mind or soul. Wherever he turns, his critics say, he sees a bleak prospect, the shadow of death, boredom, complete alienation, and lack of love and charity. For instance, Eric Homberger calls him "the saddest heart in the postwar supermarket" (74); Geoffrey Thurley mentions his "central dread of satisfaction" (175) and Charles Tomlinson criticizes his "tenderly nursed sense of defeat" (214).

Although it cannot be denied that the sad and bleak aspect of reality permeates through most of his poems,his note of gloom can be defended on the ground that it was not fabricated from an imagined fear but was the product of the mood of the time. The reality of the time did not contain any potentiality of regeneration and hope. Therefore, Larkin could not escape from the effect of his environment. But to call him a purely negative poet will be unfair. He has many poems of affirmation which celebrate social rituals and work ethic. These poems counter the claims of pessimism and establish a balance between hope and despair.

One can even discern a sense of affirmation in his bleakest poems dealing with death and decay. This does not mean that a perfect balance has been achieved. Although the pendulum always swings towards gloom and sadness, at least tension is lowered and some kind of relief is achieved. Thus Larkin cannot be called an utter pessimist or a weakling nihilist. His mood of sadness and melancholy which one detects in many of his poems is obviated by his keen observation of minute things in life , which is tantamount to celebration. Being a poet of the reality principle he depicts every aspect in life, whether bleak or cheerful. He accepts the world in its totality. The background and setting of his poems are the actual arena of human life. His poems deal with the various activities of people in different walks of life. Although they are written against the specfic British background, they have acquired a universal dimension. His settings are usually large towns or cities with a heavy traffic

where parks are filled with mothers and playful children. The characters of his poems vary from the middle-class people like Arnold in "Self's the Man" and the speaker in "Dockery and Son" to the cheap clothes sellers in "The Large Cool Store," workers in the docks in "Arrivals Departures" and poor people in "Deception." Therefore it is not proper to call his poetry bleak since it contains a wide spectrum of humanity engaged in their respective work in a spirit of affirmation. Terry Whalen is right in his observation of Larkin's world:

> As a poet who explores experience while also engaging in self-doubt and self-criticism, Larkin continually invites the reader into the pleasure of second thoughts and emotional reappraisals of attitudes. There is a range to his voice and it includes modulations that are audible as tones of humour, wit, sadness, compassion, praise and celebration. The fact that he remarked that'depression is to me as daffodils were to Wordsworth' should not be taken as his final word on his poetic personality, since a considerable dimension of his poetry moves beyond depression and toward other effects. (30)

The way Larkin describes the domestic interiors of houses suggests that he is not averse to current fashions and tastes. The houses in his poems contain televisions , telephones, sofas,

"the drier and the electric fire," "the hall to paint" and packets of old programmes and letters. In "Mr. Bleany" he captures the atmosphere of a rented room by describing most of its items in minute detail. For example, "the flowered curtains," though "thin and frayed," "fall to within five inches of the sill." These curtains help separate Bleany's inner life from the dreary atmosphere outside. Though his inner life seems as bleak as the life outside one can mark some ingredients of pleasure in his daily rituals of existence. For example, he seems to relieve his tension by tending the garden, "My bit of garden properly in hand." This hobby of looking after the small garden of the old lady provides him with a psychological compensation for his dreary life. It indicates also that Bleany has some interest in the old lady, who is as tiny as her garden. His concern for the old lady, however trivial may be, is significant in the context of his dreary existence. Another of his hobbies which gives him some pleasure is his interest in watching football matches. He also derives some pleasure by visiting his sister during the summer vacation.

Thus these small excursions into life against a dense backdrop of gloom, are ways of relieving pain. In spite of his bleak life, Bleany seems to be satisfied with his ordinary existence and enjoys the quotidian life. One can see such affirmation in the ordinary in the poem "Aubade." Though the speaker in the poem does not reach a point of security, he seems to drive some comfort from the life of inanities which include his transactions with the telephone, the offices and the postman.

Whatever may be his inner problems and tensions, he cannot ignore the means of living. Despite his tremendous fear about himself and the world, he feels that he ought to continue his activity. Although his fear and tensions cannot be removed completely, they are substantially reduced and mitigated:

> Slowly light strengthens, and the room takes shapes.
> It stands plain as a wardrobe, what we know,
> Have always known, know that we can't escape,
> Yet can't accept. One side will have to go.
> Meanwhile telephones crouch, getting ready to ring
> In locked-up offices, and all the uncaring
> Intricate rented world begins to rouse.
> The sky is white as clay, with no sun.
> Work has to be done.
> Postman like doctors go from house to house.
>
> (209)

As a pragmatist concerned with life as it is, Larkin does not decry forms of materiality. In the poem "Building" he seems to celebrate the structure of the building as a symbol of human effort to resist the thought of death. What the cathedrals could not perform, the hospital building seems to have accomplished. Though it is a place where the patients recognize that they have to die, "not yet, perhaps not here, but in the end/And somewhere like this, their last hope remains in the "struggle to transcend/The thought of dying." As R.P.Draper remarks, "It represents the whole effort of modern medical science to heal the sick and ward off death - an effort which is nevertheless finally

unavailing ..." (211). In their "effort" to live, the patients certainly vindicate that it is worth fighting for life though it is ultimately futile.

In the poem "Explosion" Larkin is quite different in his treatment of death from his treatment in the other poems. In 1972 when he was fifty he said on the BBC : "What I should like to do is, write different kinds of poems, that might be by different people. Someone said that the great thing is not to be different from other people but to be different from yourself" (Quoted by Timms 121). What he says in his BBC broadcast can be illustrated from this poem. In this poem he suggests, with an affirmative note, that the tide of life cannot be completely crippled by death. Though his poem centres round the theme of death, death is shown here not as horrible as it is shown in the other poems. The mine workers suddenly died with the shock of the explosion, but their lives could not end with their death. Their lamenting wives saw at a glimpse the images of their husbands walking and coming to them as if they were alive. Larkin is trying to suggest that though man's life ends physically in death, the impression of life continues for a long time. The "unbroken eggs" symbolize the process of continuity of life :

> The dead go on before us, they
> Are sitting in God's house in comfort,
> We shall see them face to face.
> Plain as lettering in the chapels,
> It was said, and for a second

Wives saw men of the explosion.
Larger than in life they managed.
Gold as a coin, or walking
Somehow from the sun towards them,
One showing the eggs unbroken.

(175)

Though in his poetry we do not find a direct acceptance of God, Larkin does not deny the importance of religion in the life of man. To him, religion is not a dogma or faith one should accept uncritically. His concept of religion is not derived from his belief in any superhuman power, but is mostly secular, intertwined with the emotional needs of man. This attitude can be found in the poems "Church Going" and "Water." In these poems Larkin reflects on the implications of his frequent visit to country churches. As Bruce Martin remarks, "Larkin's church goer finds a commonsense reason for this attraction to the church: the metaphysical hungerings which he shares with most men" (68). "Church Going" can be divided into two parts. The first part comprises first two stanzas and the second part the remaining five stanzas. In the first stanza the speaker at first vacillates between respect and annoyance. As soon as he steps into the church he finds it abandoned, suggested by such expressions as "sprawling of flowers... brownish now," "And a tense musty, unignorable silence." But soon he realizes that something inexplicable did make him stop in "awkward reverence." The whole poem seems to be an answer to the question, "why do you stop and come inside?"

In the second stanza the speaker considers the building as a piece of architecture. But again, he is not just interested in its structural design his use of Latin words indicates that he is familiar with the church like a devout Christian. Though he boyishly imitates a vicar's voice his denotation of "Irish six pence" is a mark of respect. There is a tone of mocking parody here, but also there is enough evidence to suggest that he is deeply familiar with iconic figures represented in the church. In the second part of the poem the tone is changed from descriptive to meditative. He considers the implications of "the church in decline and the underlying meaning of what the church has traditionally stood for and might be made to stand for in a secular future" (King 30). The following lines illustrate this:

> Wondering what to look for; wondering, too,
> When churches fall completely out of use
> What we shall turn them into, if we shall keep
> A few cathedrals chronicllly on show,
> Their parchment, plate and pyx in locked cases
> And let the rest rent-free to rain and sheep.
> Shall we avoid them as unlucky places?
>
> (97)

The above lines indicate that religion is in decline, but soon the poet describes the last church goer seeking out some purpose from his visit to the church. The speaker wonders whether the churches in the future will be reduced to monuments to be visited by tourists interested in ancient sites.

In the subsequent stanzas the speaker's mood seems to be moving through satire to apprehensiveness. He has become more serious and questioning. His final statement shows that man is interested, in spiritual order: "And what remains when disbelief has gone?" The self-definition which is given at the beginning of the poem by the speaker as being "bored uninformed" should not be taken as a final word on his attitude to churches, but as Kuby puts it, "the entire poem shows the speaker to be not `bored' at all, but actively thoughtful, reflective, doubting, questioning, imagining, and resolving" (111).

Thus he finally understands that churches deserve reverence. He appreciates the silence and seriousness of the place and recognizes the need for some faith and admires the role of the church in the social and religious functions of marriage, birth and death. Thus the church is important both in its religious as well as in its social function. Therefore, without the church the lives of people would lack organization and focus:

> A serious house on serios earth it is,
> In whose blent air all our compulsion meet,
> Are recognised, and robed as destinies.
> And that much never can be obsolete,
> Since someone will forever be surprising
> A hunger in himself to be more serious,
> And gravitating with it to this ground,
> Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in,
> If only that so many dead lie round.
>
> (98)

In spite of the decline of faith in religion after the Second World War some religious sentiments did continue to colour people's mental outlook. Larkin believes in these sentiments. Therefore, he calls the church as "A serious house on serious earth," a place that transacts some serious business with life, particularly at a time when human beings are in utter spiritual and emotional crisis. Kuby sums up very effectively the theme of the poem:

> At first reading "Church Going" seems to be entirely an expression of loss in the modern world, loss of senses of continuum in history, of identification with the lives of forebears, of unity or integrity in the events of the life of the individual, loss of awe, of reverence, of mystery -in short, loss of belief in the Platonic Christian Ideal that contained all temporal loss and change in transcendent solution. The poem, however, is not despairing. A positive value results, or can potentially result, where the ideal 'Here endeth'. What can remain when even "disbelief has gone" is seriousness.
>
> (109)

On the whole, the poem is in fact not about Christianity but about the act of going to a church, which is a social act. Thus Larkin is concerned more with the objects of the place than with

any Christian philosophy. Yet the importance of religion is implied indirectly in the poem. Larkin seems to say in this poem what Freud wrote in The Future of an Illusion:

> The doctrines of religion are not a subject that one can be clever about, as one can about any other. Our culture is built upon them; the preservation of human society rests on the assumption that the majority of mankind believe in the truth of these doctrines. If they are taught that there is no almighty and all just God, no divine world order, and no future life, then they will feel exempt from all obligation to follow the rules of culture. Uninhibited and free from fear, everybody will follow his social, egoistic instincts, and will seek to prove his power. Chaos which we have banished through thousands of years of the work of civilization will begin again. (60-61)

In the poem "Water" Larkin suggests about the kind of religion he would like to construct "If I were called in." The use of "If" implies that he is not called in. But his compulsion to imagine such a call and the religion he is to construct seems to provide an answer to his emotional needs. Bruce Martin says: "While not religious in any traditional sense, he feels dissatisfied with his disbelief as with conventional dogma" (40).

So while his characters are not very often explicitly concerned with a will to believe in an age of disbelief and scepticism, the reflective poet in him perceives the instinctual necessity of faith inherent deep down in every individual. One cannot call this ambivalence or a spiritual conflict in him but an aspect of his "double-vision" produced out of his close awareness of human needs. "

Though Freud regards religions as "illusions fulfilment of the oldest, strongest and most insistent wishes of mankind" (The Future of an Illusion 52), they are primordial needs for human stability. Freud calls man's attachment to religion analogous to the child's clinging to his father for protection. "The benevolent rule of divine providence," Freud says, "allays our anxiety in face of life's danger, the establishment of a moral world order ensures the fulfilment of the demands of justice, which within human culture have so often remained unfulfilled" (The Future of an Illusion 51-52). Larkin seems to have corroborated in his poetry such a belief which is an illusion but a necessary one. Like one clings to dreams for pleasure, one sticks to religion for emotional sustenance.

Like "secular" religion, the importance of work in the life of man provides another affirmative note in Larkin's poetry. Larkin treats this theme in such poems as "Toad" and "Toad Revisited." In these poems he sets up a debate between whether work is a virtue or a curse. He finally opts for the former and suggests that a proper work ethic built into daily activities will afford man a source for pleasure and fulfilment.

"Toads" begins with two questions which indicate that the speaker is facing an unpleasant situation involving the necessity for work:

> Why should I let the toad work
> Squat on my life.
> Can,'t I use my wit as a pitchfork
> And drive the brute off?
>
> (89)

The speaker seeks to dispel the dull routine of work by his wit. That is why, he is thinking of getting rid of the plodding toad, which symbolizes work, from his life. Then he gives examples of comic characters who can deceive reality and live on their wits: "Lecturers, lispers/lobels, Loblolly-men, = lotus." The alliteration of the sound l indicates that he is talking about people who are mentally lazy and insensitive. In fact, he seems to think, they are self-deceived and conceited. Therefore he realizes, as Bruce Martin says, "work is part of his own psyche and he can see that he is unable to break away from the security" (15). Similarly, in the poem "Toads Revisited" he expands the same theme and defends his way of life and choices by contrasting them with those of others. But too much preoccupation with work is also detrimental to one's health. The speaker, therefore, goes out of his office to the park for some relief. He feels that a balance between work and leisure is necessary:

Walking around in the park
Should feel better than work:
The lake, the sunshine,
The grass to lie on.
Blurred playground noises
Beyond black-stockinged nurses -
Not a bad place to be -
Yet it doesn't suit me.

(147)

But if he has to make a choice between work and leisure, he would choose the former. He likes work because it offers him security:

No, give me my in-tray,
My loaf-haired secretary,
My shall-I-keep-the call-in-Sir:
What else can I answer.

(148)

At the end of the poem Larkin realizes that only work can alleviate problems like sickness, old age and fear of death. His concept of work is part of his belief in the reality principle which, interestingly, provides a source for pleasure and relief. What Freud said about Voltaire's idea of work can be applicable to Larkin's:

> Laying stress upon importance of work has a greater effect than any other technique of living in the direction of binding the individual more closely to reality; in his

> work he is securely attached to a part of reality the human community.... The daily work of earning a livelihood affords particular satisfaction when it has been selected by free choice.... And yet as a path to happiness work is not valued very highly by men. (Freud, Civilization and Its Discontents 34 footnotes)

The poem "Poetry of Departures" is perhaps one of Larkin's most Freudian of poems in so far as it treats the theme of work as attachment to reality. Although workers on jobs may like to suspend their work and go out, Larkin likes them to stay attached to their work and to derive pleasure from their professional environment. That does not mean that he is against relaxation and leisure, but what he is against is that one should not break the inertia of work for the sake of some sensual pleasure of freedom:

> Sometimes you hear, fifth-hand.
> As epitaph:
> He chucked up everything
> And just cleared off,
> And always the voice will sound
> Certain you approve
> This audacious, purifying,
> Elemental move.
>
> (85)

The speaker at the end justifies what is regarded as his own choice and that is his will to work.

As we have seen in the previous chapters Larkin's major themes are loss, boredom, fear, passing of time, dread and isolation. Love is another theme which usually goes unnoticed in his poetry. But a close study of his poetry will reveal that Larkin, despite his professed antipathy to love, celebrates a very special kind of love based upon human relationship. This love is not erotic or sensual, but is a product of the human need for harmonious living. Therefore, even in his poetry of the reality principle, he celebrates this sublimated love based upon mutual understanding and faith. Poems like "An Arundel Tomb," "Broadcast" and "Whitsun Weddings" deal with such positive emotions or attitudes. Though the voices of their heart and soul are subdued, the speakers in these poems understand the value of love in this special way.

The idea that love is a sustaining impulse of human civilization is exploited more fully in the poem "Arundel Tomb" in which the speaker meditates on the stone effigies of an earl and his countess on a Chichester cathedral. He records the various details of the tomb :

> Such plainness of the pre-baroque
> Hardly involves the eye, until
> It meets his left hand gauntlit, still
> Clasped empty in the other; and
> One sees, with a sharp tender shock,

His hand withdrawn, holding her hand.

(110)

The hands of the earl and the countess are joined together in an embrace of love. This gesture of love may not be conspicuous in the midst of other elaborate decorations but the speaker is struck by the sculptor who thought that it was worthwhile to depict such a scene. Like Keats's young lovers on the Grecian Urn, these lovers symbolize the perennial aspect of love transcending the flux of time.

The significance of the statue lies in the fact that though centuries have passed these images have not changed and the tomb remains strikingly visual. The poet reflects upon the mute witness by the images of the passing of time :

. . . . Rigidly they
Persisted, linked through lengths and breadths
Of time. Snow fell, undated, light
Each summer thronged the glass. A bright
Litter of birdcalls strewed the same
Bone-riddled ground. And up the paths
The endless altered people came.

(110)

The speaker presumes that in succeeding centuries the statue may lose some of its brightness and appear less charming but the truth remains that the couple had deserved a great respect in

life. Larkin believes that time preserves some such gestures for eternity.

In the last stanza the poet celebrates love as a counter-force to human isolation :

> Time has transfigured them into
> Untruth. The stone fidelity
> They hardly meant has come to be
> Their final blazon and to prove
> Our almost-instinct almost true:
> What will survive of us is love.
>
> (111)

When love is "transfigured" into "untruth" through art it becomes a source for consolation. Through this visual incarnation of love Larkin seems to cherish the sanctity of human relationship. However ironic the phrase "stone fidelity" may be, in the final analysis, as Simon Petch remarks, the poem ends with a "rigorous and subtle series of qualifications, for this poet never allows us to entertain unreal expectations" (48). Here "untruth" is not allied to fantasy; in Larkin's scheme of things untruth includes truth and establishes a happy relationship between seemingly opposing realities. The word "untruth" may also suggest that the poet is not prepared to accept any easy and predictable solution to human problems. Larkin's treatment of love might take us by surprise, but it is not certainly romantic. As Bruce Martin says, Larkin does not depict the consequences of love as a

> potentially glamorous Byronic despair, but simply as an unexciting descent back into the dull existence making up most of life. His repeated insistence that common sense need not preclude feeling and affection, indeed that it must not, makes him no more a sentimentalist than Swift and Pope, and probably constitutes a major source of the human appeal his poems have had. (62)

Martin's remarks very aptly sum up Larkin's concept of love which consists of a commonsensical approach to life through feeling and affection.

Another example of such love is found in the poem "Broadcast" which George MacBeth describes as "one of Larkin's rare poems" (277). It beautifully captures the admiring and loving mood of the speaker who is listening to the radio broadcast of a BBC concert which his beloved is attending. So love takes form in the mind of the speaker through an imagined glimpse of his beloved. Larkin confesses in the L.P. recording of his reading of the poem that "Broadcast" is about as near as I get in this collection to a love poem" (Quoted by Timms 105). The following passage is an illustration of Larkin's way of dealing with love:

> I think your face among all the faces
> Beautiful and devout before
> Cascades of monumental slithering,

One of your gloves unnoticed on the floor
Besides those new, slightly out-moded shoes.

(140)

The speaker magnificently introduces his love as he uses music as a background. In Larkin's poetry music and love are very often associated with each other. The speaker is very keen to capture the image of his beloved in his mind "among all those faces." At the end of his vision, he is disturbed by the sudden pause of the music and he is brought back to the mundane world :

Here it goes quickly dark. I lose
All but the outline of the still and withering
Leavees on half-emptied trees. Behind
The glowing wavebands, rabid storms of choreling
By being distant overpower my mind.

(140)

Yet he is anxious to pick his beloved out of the crowd. He does not want to lose her in his imagination. He tries to catch her individual sound amongst the applause of the rest of the audience. This poem celebrates love as something that provides forms of stability to human imagination and faith.

Perhaps the most important poem Larkin wrote on the theme of love and marriage is "Whitsun Weddings." This poem celebrates implicitly the importance of marriage in the journey of life. The poem is about the speaker's realization of a shared experience with people whom he did not initially like. In the beginning the poet is engrossed in looking at the landscape as the train in

which he is travelling moves south through the countryside and the industrialized areas of Sheffield. Many newly-weds join him in the train and celebrate their wedding through parties:

> At first, I didn't notice what a noise
> The wedding made
> Each station that we stopped at: sun destroys
> The interest of what is happening in the shade,
> And down the long cool platforms whoops and skirls.
> I took for porters larking with the mails,
> And went on reading.
>
> (114)

Gradually the speaker is drawn into the groups. In their company his initial attitude of indifference changed into understanding. He begins to think that he is part and parcel of their company. He then fully participates in their joy. In the final lines of the poem he is hopeful that the young couples will give life to London. As P. R. King puts it,

> The journey symbolizes the change that is taking place in the lives of the couples, and as the train finally decelerates it creates a sense of falling which suggests to the poet the image of an arrow-shower. It is an image suggesting the new lives of the couples shooting forth into London and falling upon a life of new hope and happiness like a shower of rain bringing forth new stalks of wheat. (36)

Thus with a symbol of regeneration and creativity the poet closes the poem and suggests that love and marriage will usher in a new world of hope and joy.

Larkin's more affirmative view of life is seen in his poems about social rituals. In the poem "To the Sea" the speaker celebrates the sea shore festivities as part of the traditional rituals connected with the long-established convention of sea-bathing of the British people. Thus sea-going represents, as Bruce Martin says, "the necessary link between the contemporary Britisher and his ancient forebears" (33). The speaker feels that such public rejoicing relieves the monotony of human existence. Larkin contemplates in this poem on the organic connection between the human and the natural world. He thinks that the virtue of the life of the community can be derived from the natural world:

> Everything crowds under the low horizon:
> Steep beach, blue water, towels, red bathing caps,
> The small hushed waves' repeated fresh collapse
> Up the warm yellow sand, and further off
> A white steamer stuck in the afternoon.
> Still going on, all of it still going on!
> To lie, eat, sleep in hearing of the surf
> (Ears to transistors, that sound tame enough
> under the sky), or gently up and down
> Lead the uncertain children, frilled in white
> And grasping at enormous air, or wheel

The rigid old along for them to feel
A final summer, plainly still occurs
As half an annual pleasure, half a rite.

(173)

What attracts the speaker most is the sense of innocence displayed by the gestures of people during this annual ritual, gestures which are almost religious.

The urge for communal rituals is also the theme of "Show Saturday" which centres round a country agricultural fair. Like the "Whitsun Weddings" the poem is full of concrete details of human and non-human images accumulated at one place. Each exhibition has its own appreciating crowd cherishing the feat with fascinated eyes and throbbing hearts. The site of the fair has been turned into a wonderful centre of superb skill and talent. The poet seems to suggest by accumulating the details of the scene that through social ritual and communal participation one can give a positive orientation to life.

The concluding part of the poem portrays the dispersal of people to their respective places as the show comes to its end:

Back now to autumn, leaving the ended husk
Of summer that brought them here for
Show Saturday.
. . . . . .
To winter coming, as the dismantled. Show
Itself dies back into the area of work.

(201)

The poem thus suggests that life comprises both the "pleasure-principle" embodied here in the show and the "reality principle" symbolized by work. A happy combination of both the principles makes life worthliving.

As we have discussed earlier, Larkin's poetry deals extensively with the symbiotic relationship between happiness and sorrow, pleasure and pain. Some of his poems deal exclusively with happiness, some exclusively with pain, but the poems discussed in this chapter deal with both, in their inextricable relationship. They at least try to suggest a balance between the two principles -"pleasure" and "reality" -Larkin is deeply preoccupied with. But he is more of a poet of the reality principle with all its gloom and melancholy than of the pleasure principle, although moods of joy and happiness are sprinkled throughout his poetry.

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